



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Freedom House Museum

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Image: Taken in 1861, when Union troops were occupying the building. Library of Congress.

This week's article highlights the City of Alexandria's newest acquisition, the Freedom House Museum at 1315 Duke St. Once notorious as the field office of Franklin and Armfield, the largest domestic slave dealing firm of its time, the city plans to restore the building to expand the museum to interpret this dark



period of American history. To do so, and make the site's history available to all, significant funds need to be raised to restore and interpret the former Alexandria Slave Pen.

The building was constructed by Gen. Robert Young in 1818. Despite being a prominent Alexandrian, Young was dogged by financial problems. In 1828, Merchant's Bank, which was listed as the owner by this point, leased the property, which took up almost the entire block of Duke between Payne and West, to Isaac Franklin and John Armfield to run their field office.

Agents of the slave dealers purchased individuals throughout Maryland and Virginia and brought them to the Alexandria Slave Pen before transport to the Deep South. The names of the enslaved can be seen today on ship manifests and court records.

Armfield was the partner who lived in the house, and he moved his wife Martha Franklin, his partner's niece, to the upper floors in 1834. The firm disbanded in 1836, but that didn't mean that the Alexandria Slave Jail, as it was later known, discontinued its role in the domestic slave trade.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Instead, a succession of small firms occupied the building until the Union Army occupied Alexandria in 1861. The last tenant had fled town, leaving one elderly man chained to the floor.

Thanks to local organizers, including Annie B. Rose, whose father, Henry Bailey, had once been held on the property, the building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1978. For decades, the building was used as residences.

In an example of poetic justice, the Northern Virginia Urban League, a community-based organization devoted to empowering minorities, purchased the building in 1996. They opened the Freedom House Museum on the lower level in 2008.

In 2018, the Office of Historic Alexandria entered into a collaboration with NVUL. The partnership is dedicated to preserving and interpreting this historic site. Last month, the City of Alexandria purchased the building from NVUL.

Plans are in place to expand exhibit space and include a discussion of other aspects of the domestic slave trade and its role in American history. But before new artifacts can be acquired and displayed, the most important artifact of the museum, the building itself, needs to be restored and improved.

The Historic Alexandria Museums are participating in this year's Spring2Action giving campaign on April 15. They are raising funds to establish a historic preservation fund for Freedom House. If you are interested in donating or want to check on the fundraising progress, visit Spring2Action.org. Our ability to tell this story relies in part on you.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.